

EAST DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of a joint meeting of the Housing Review Board and the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel held at Knowle, Sidmouth on 21 September 2009

Present:

Councillors:	Tenants:
John Humphreys	Keith Barrett
Pauline Stott	Ann Bickham
	Ted Brown
	Joyce Ebborn
	Sheila Graham
	Brian Hart
	Victor Kemp
	Christine Morrison
	John Powley
	Brad Priddis
	Harry Roberts
	Sue Saunders

Also present: Honorary Alderman David Scott

Sue Bewes, Housing Strategy Manager
John Golding, Head of Housing & Social Inclusion
Andy Grigg, Housing Services Manager
Jane Reading, Tenant Participation Officer
Alethea Thompson, Democratic Services Officer

Apologies:

Councillors:	Tenants:
Vivienne Ash	Mrs Bury
Jill Elson	Sue Dawson
Douglas Hull	Brian Ewing
Jim Knight	Phil Portman
Co-opted Independent Community Representative:	Charlie Rowe
Mr R Finch	

The meeting started at 10.05 am and ended at 12.00 pm

*1 **Election of Chairman**

RESOLVED that Ted Brown be elected Chairman for the meeting.

*2 **Welcome and introductions**

The Chairman welcomed all those present to the meeting and invited each person to briefly introduce themselves. Honorary Alderman Scott was welcomed to the meeting as an observer.

*3 **Verbal report on the work of the Housing Review Board**

The Chairman of the Housing Review Board, Ted Brown, gave those present a verbal report on the work of the Housing Review Board. He explained how the Housing Review Board had come into existence, following the Housing Stock Options Appraisal process. It was noted that East Devon District Council was one of the first councils to set up such a Board and that the concept of a Housing Review Board was still a unique approach for local authorities.

The Housing Review Board was balanced, with 5 councillors, 5 tenant members and 2 independent community representatives (one position was currently vacant). It was a properly constituted committee of the Council and was accountable to the Council. The Chairman explained that the overall purpose of the Board was to advise the Council's Executive Board on landlord and housing management issues, and keep under review the options for the ownership and management of the Council's housing stock. It was noted that the Board met approximately 5 times a year. Examples of the issues discussed at Housing Review Board meetings were benchmarking, procurement consortium, carbon management in Council housing, communal cleaning, equality and diversity, HomeSwapper, Housing Revenue Account, introductory tenancies, Systems Thinking and a review of sheltered housing. It was noted that sub committees (Task and Finish Forums) could be formed to consider specific issues such as the review of sheltered housing.

*4 **Verbal report on the work of the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel**

The Chairman of the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel, Sue Saunders, gave those present a verbal report on the work of the Panel. The aims of the Panel and its relationship with the Council were noted. It was reported that there were some valuable new members on the Panel and that there was now a waiting list to join the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel. Over 200 tenants were listed on the interested tenants register.

It was noted that tenant participation was encouraged by East Devon District Council and the Government. The Panel had a new, more businesslike approach. Members had received a lot of invaluable training and had had the opportunity to meet and talk with tenants from other housing authorities all over the country.

The main priority for the Panel was two way communications. The Panel gathered a great deal of information which needed to be collected, collated and used where needed. Other Panel aspirations were for the right for new tenants to retain fixtures and fittings to be formalised, early inspections and viewings of properties, 100% accompanied viewings and tenant involvement in the Systems Thinking process.

Achievements of the Panel for April 2008 to March 2009 included communal cleaning, green issues, choice based lettings, the appointment of a Tenant Participation assistant, the 2008 tenants' conference, training, the Defend Council Housing trip to Westminster, the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) conference and the setting up of a tenant support group.

The Chairman of the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel stated that she appreciated the involvement and work of all the housing staff and tenants.

*5 **Future ambitions, roles and responsibilities of the Housing Review Board and the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel**

Those present considered and discussed the future ambitions, roles and responsibilities of the Housing Review Board and the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel. It was hoped that there would be a more regular exchange of information between the two groups and that the Housing Review Board would make better use of the tenant review groups. It was suggested that each tenant review group should provide a regular written report of their work, which would then be available to the Housing Review Board. This would also help with the housing service's benchmarking and audit trail.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion reported that he was proud of the work of the Housing Review Board and the progress it had made over the past three and a half years. The annual review produced each year was evidence of how much the Board had accomplished and the fact that the Board had a tenant chair was a great indicator of the success of tenant involvement.

It was noted that there were big challenges ahead and that it was important to set out the ambitions and achievements for the Board over the next few years. There was a need to know the outcome of the Government's review of local authority housing finance, as well as consideration of the current financial market and the ability of newly created housing associations to raise finance to purchase stock. It was noted that there was no strong councillor view to transfer the housing stock, but the greatest influence for stock transfer was the Local Government Review.

*6 **Housing Strategy and associated plans**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion which raised awareness of the Housing Strategy and the recently produced summary document. The report also highlighted the associated housing plans and strategies and how they complimented the overarching strategy position. It was noted that the Housing Strategy went beyond the remit of the Housing Review Board and the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel, and set out the direction of travel for the housing service. The Housing Strategy Manager reported the first monitoring meeting of the Housing Strategy had been held and that she was happy that it was on target.

Concern was expressed over the size of Council houses to be provided in the future. It was agreed that space was a big issue and members wanted to know how the Council would be addressing the issue of 21st century homes. It was reported that the Council was about to start a modest new build programme and that the homes would comply with the Home and Communities Agency standards as a minimum. There was a huge cost involved in building new homes and a compromise was needed in respect of what was ideal and what was achievable. If rents were to be kept low, resulting in low revenue for the Council, the costs would also need to be kept down. Those present were reminded of all the people in the area that required a home. The Housing Services Manager reported that building regulations required all properties to provide adequate space for wheelchairs. It was noted that some sheltered housing needed decommissioning due to its size.

Concern was expressed that some three bedroom properties were currently occupied by one person. It was felt that more help should be provided for the people who wanted to downsize. Many people needed help with the whole process of downsizing and moving home, not just the financial costs involved. It was noted that the Housing Needs Manager had asked the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel to review the downsizing procedure and make recommendations to the Housing Review Board.

*7 **Tenant Services Authority – consultation on the Housing and Regeneration Act 2009 (Registration of Local Authorities) Order 2009**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion which summarised the consultation proposals for extending the remit of the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) to regulate local authority landlords. The report set out the Government's proposals and some of the main features of the new regulatory regime.

The TSA would be the regulator of all social housing and wanted to integrate with the existing regulators (the Audit Commission and the Communities and Local Government Directorate). The Government's intention was that the TSA should work to raise the standard of services for all social tenants no matter who their landlord. The TSA would not be examining local authorities' wider strategic housing role.

It was noted that the consultation would close on 30 October 2009. It was expected that Council tenants would benefit from increased protection under proposals to extend the powers of the TSA.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion generally welcomed the proposals for a single regulator with a clear set of standards that were developed through customer involvement. It was noted that the TSA were looking to recruit tenant members on a national tenant panel.

*8 **Audit Commission short notice inspections**

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion outlined his report which gave a number of pointers to the areas of housing activity that were likely to come under scrutiny during an Audit Commission short notice inspection. These 'snap' inspections looked at themes that cut across housing organisations such as access to services, diversity and value for money. If the Council successfully demonstrated that it knew its customers, with a good customer profile, had a good set of service standards, demonstrated that its customers had influence over services, and finally kept its customers engaged and informed it would stand a good chance of getting a high score.

It was noted that written communication between the Housing Review Board and the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel would aid an audit trail.

*9 **Supporting People – Wardens vs Mobile Support Officers**

Concern was expressed over the loss of Resident Wardens on sheltered housing sites. Tenants had noticed a definite difference in the use and standard of the community centres since there was no longer a Warden on site. Some problems had been experienced regarding locking up some of the community centres.

It was agreed that the new Mobile Support Officer service did not allow for intimacy between the client and the Warden. Seeing a regular face allowed vulnerable tenants to build up trust and confidence. However Mobile Support Officers were more flexible and could go where the support was needed, regardless of whether the tenant lived in sheltered accommodation. The use of Mobile Support Officers allowed the services of staff to be applied where the support was needed and it was intended that this would facilitate a more professional standard and service for tenants. Although there were no longer Wardens, if residents were in any difficulty they had 24 hour access to the Home Safeguard alarm service. The use of Mobile Support Officers by other local authorities had been hugely successful.

*9 **Supporting People – Wardens vs Mobile Support Officers** (cont'd)

It was reported that there had been a huge amount of discussion and reporting on the move from Wardens to Mobile Support Officers. This had partly come about from the European Working Time Directive restrictions on the amount of time people could work, and from the Supporting People guidelines on providing support services. There would be further changes following the decommissioning of some sheltered housing.

The Head of Housing and Social Inclusion urged tenants to bring any shortcomings of the current Mobile Support Officer service to the attention of the Housing Business Manager. It was noted that there would soon be more people over the age of 60 than there were under the age of 60, and there would not be enough people to look after the elderly. Ideas were needed for the future.

*10 **Homes for life**

Those present discussed the specifications, including disability access and size requirements for homes for life. It was agreed that homes should be designed for modern day living.

*11 **Questions to Board and Panel members**

A question was raised regarding where a gypsy/traveller site may be located. It was noted that this was a decision for East Devon District Council to make. Following a gypsy and traveller survey conducted across Devon it was determined that one site was needed in East Devon. It was thought that a site had been identified, but members were advised to contact the Development Manager for further information. It was reported that a question had been included in the tenant profiling to identify any gypsies/travellers in Council housing.

It was suggested that the Housing Revenue Account should go before the Tenant and Leaseholder Customer Panel so that they could understand the changes that had been made and any future restrictions. It was agreed that the Head of Housing and Social Inclusion or one of the Council's accountants would attend a Panel meeting to explain income and expenditure implications within the Housing Revenue Account.

*12 **Any other business**

Those present agreed that the meeting had been very beneficial.

It was agreed that the Tenant Participation Officer would send out a feedback sheet to all attendees so that any comments could be sought and taken account of.